

International Brief Gender and Aging

Demographic Dimensions

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U.S. Department of Commerce
Economics and Statistics Administration
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

IB/97-3
Issued December 1997

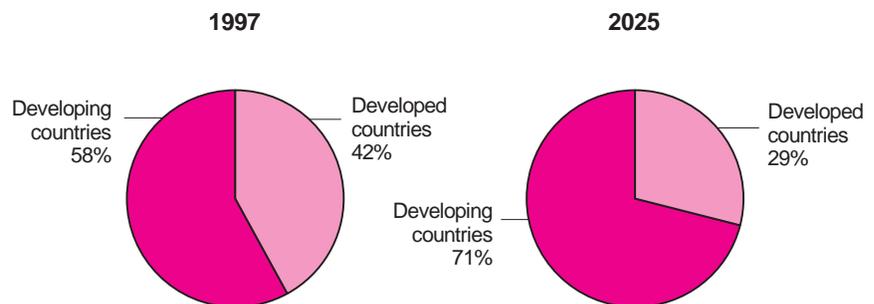
The United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 prepared a platform which provides an analysis of obstacles facing the world's women, including older women, and outlines a series of policy solutions for removing these obstacles. Conference documents emphasize a life-cycle approach to the understanding of women's status, recognizing the importance of age and the relationship between life course events and well-being in later life. Improvements in health, education, and economic security will have an enormous impact on how women fare as they age.

Women are the majority of the older¹ population in virtually all nations and face different circumstances and challenges than men as they age. Older women are more likely to be widowed, to live alone, and to live in poverty. Older women tend to have lower educational attainment, less formal labor force experience, and more family caregiving responsibilities than do older men. In this brief, we will examine the demographics that underlie the socioeconomic differences of gender and aging.

¹ The term "older" is an arbitrary concept used only for crossnational comparative purposes. In this brief, "older" generally refers to ages 60 and over.

Figure 1.

World Distribution of Older Women (60+): 1997 and 2025



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

Majority of Older Women Live in Developing Countries

In 1997, approximately 10 percent (561 million) of the world's population is aged 60 years and older, and this level is projected to increase to 15 percent by 2025. Persons aged 60 and over represent 19 percent of the total population in developed countries and 7 percent in the developing world.² By the year 2025, these figures will increase to approximately 27 and 13 percent, respectively. Women constitute 55 percent of all persons aged 60 and over, and the

² The "developed" and "developing" country categories used in this brief correspond to the "more developed" and "less developed" classification employed by the United Nations. Developed countries comprise all nations in Europe and North America, plus Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The remaining nations of the world are considered to be developing countries.

majority (58 percent) of the world's 310 million older women live in developing countries. By 2025, nearly three-quarters of the world's older women are expected to reside in what is known today as the developing world (Figure 1).

Although population aging currently is more advanced in developed countries (in terms of the proportion of all persons aged 60 and over), developing countries too are aging, and at a much more rapid pace than has been the case in most developed nations because of faster declines in fertility. In at least 75 developing countries, the projected increase in the number of older women between 1997 and 2025 exceeds 150 percent, while in many developed countries the increase is less than 50 percent (Figure 2). Sub-Saharan Africa's 15 million older women are projected to more than double to

Figure 2.

Percent Increase for Women Aged 60 and Over: 1997 to 2025

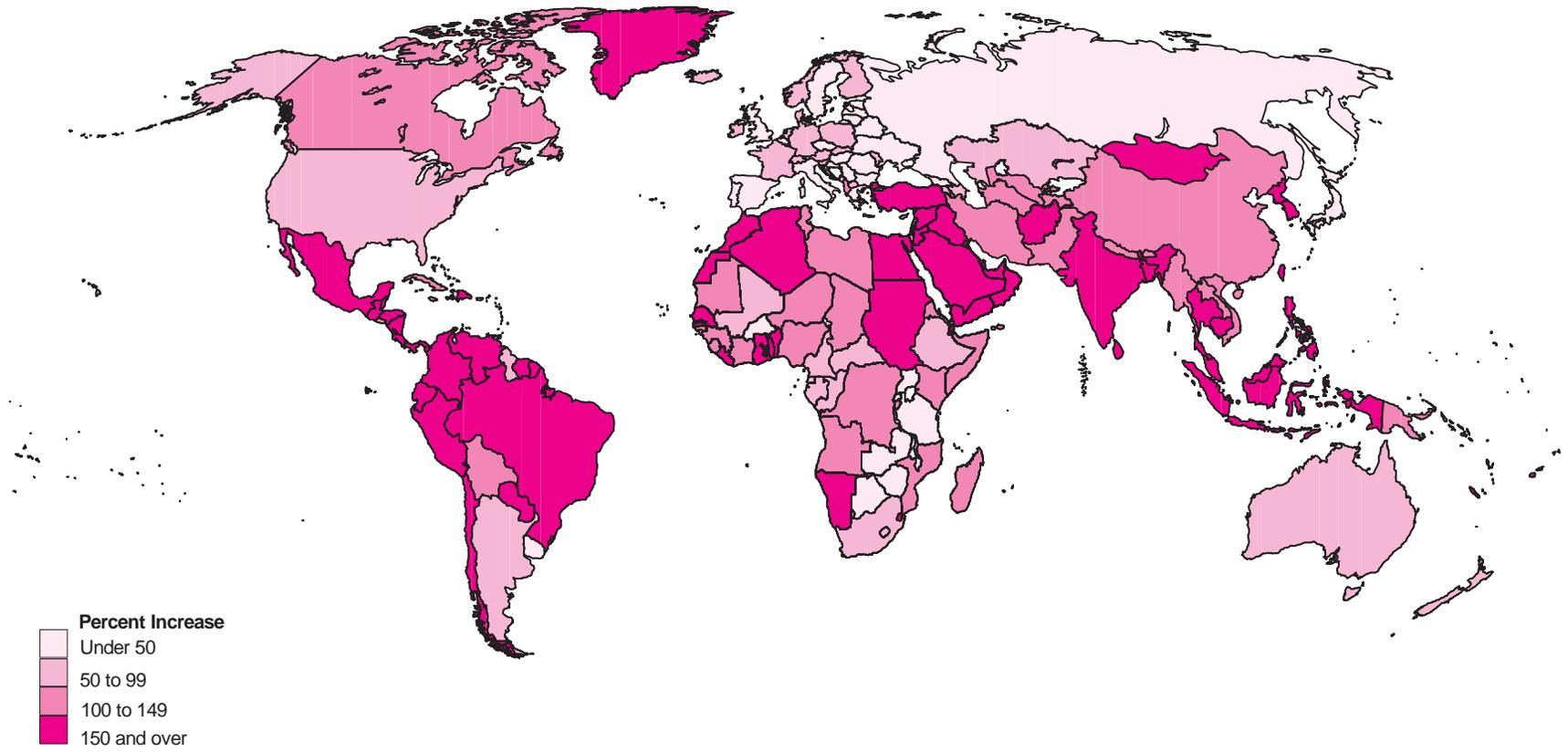
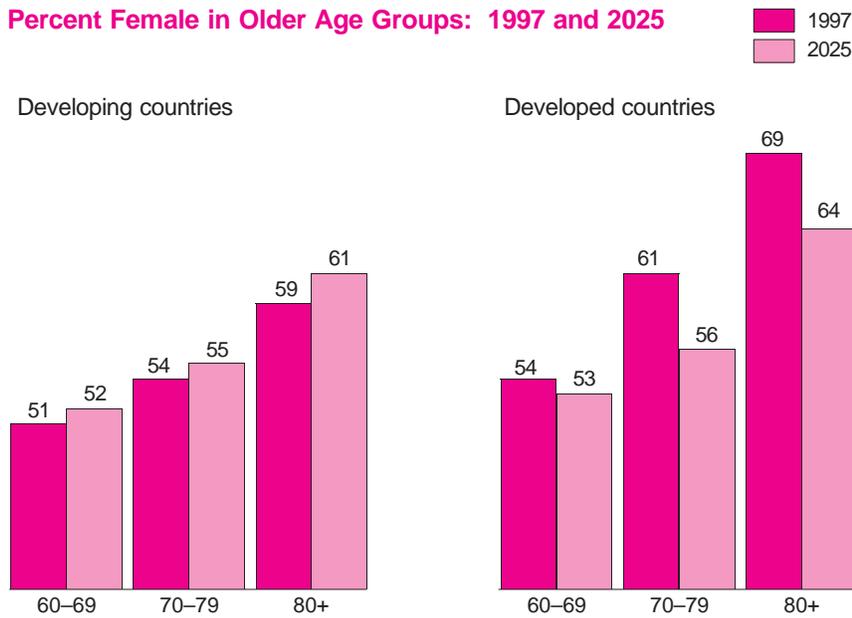


Figure 3.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

33 million by 2025; by comparison, the total number of older women in Europe is expected to increase only 40 percent. The older women of Asia number 144 million today, more than the total number of older women in all developed countries combined. By 2025, the Asian number is expected to mushroom to 355 million.

The Feminization of Later Life

In all regions and practically all countries of the world, women account for the majority of the older population, and the proportion female increases with age. On the global level, women make up just over half of the age group 60-69, but they account for 65 percent of the oldest old (80 years and older). The term the *feminization of later life* has been used to describe how women predominate at older ages and how the proportions increase with advancing age (Arber and Ginn, 1994).

There are differences in the gender imbalance between developed and developing

regions of the world. In developed countries, women currently account for a larger share of the older population than they do in developing countries (Figure 3). If the trend in developing-country mortality approximates what has been observed in industrialized nations, the future gap between male and female life expectancy would be expected to widen; one likely result would be an increasing proportion female at older ages. In developed countries, on the other hand, demographers expect that life expectancy will increase somewhat faster for males than for females, with resulting declines in the proportion female at older ages.

One Person in Six May Be an Older Woman

Another way to appreciate the numbers and growth of the older female population is to look at older women as a percent of total population. As the years progress, the proportion of older women in the general population is anticipated to steadily increase in both

developing and developed countries. In most developed countries, older women currently account for more than 10 percent of the total population (Figure 4). By 2025, many national proportions will exceed 15 percent, and in Italy and Japan, older women will constitute more than 18 percent of the total population. In other words, 1 out of every 6 Italians and Japanese will be an older woman. Although older women account for a smaller proportion of total population in developing countries, proportions are expected to increase in these countries as well, and to more than double in the world's most populous nation, China.

Women Live Longer Than Men

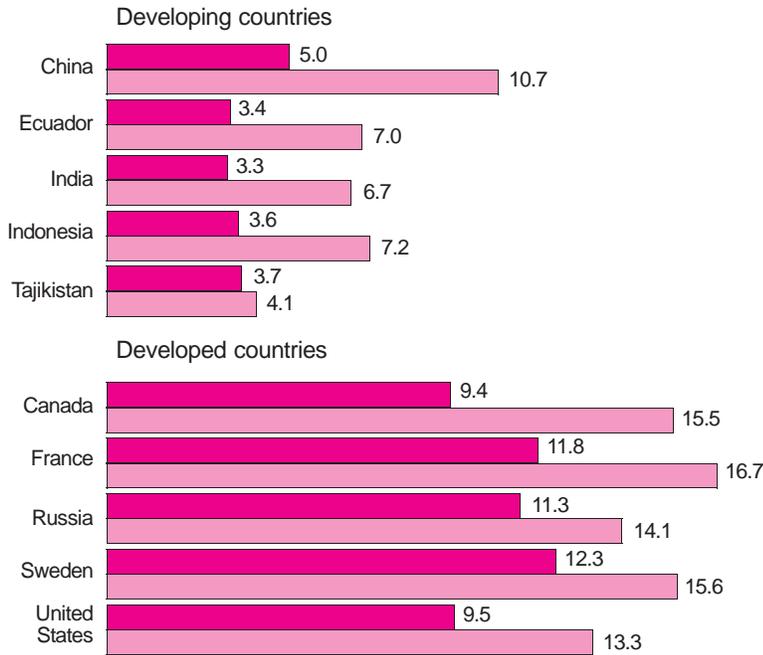
In almost all countries of the world, females enjoy an advantage over males in terms of life expectancy. In developed countries, the average gap in life expectancy between the sexes is approximately seven years. In some countries (e.g., Russia, Estonia, Belarus), gender differentials in life expectancy exceed 10 years as a result of unusually high levels of current adult male mortality. In contrast, developing countries have a relatively small 3-year difference in life expectancy between the sexes (Figure 5). This smaller differential is, at least in part, due to high levels of maternal mortality in some developing countries.

The female advantage in life expectancy continues throughout the life course. In developed countries, women at age 60 can expect to live, on average, 3 to 5 years longer than their male counterparts. The female advantage is smaller in developing countries, ranging from less than a year to nearly four years. Although women tend to live longer than men, they also tend to spend more of their older years in a disabled state (Colvez, 1996).

Figure 4.

Older Women as a Percent of the Total Population: 1997 and 2025

1997
2025



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

Oldest Old Increasing Rapidly

The fastest-growing segment of most populations is the oldest old, defined here as persons aged 80 and over (Figure 6). Currently in developed countries, 19 percent of all older women are aged 80 years or older, and by 2025 nearly one-quarter of all older women will be in this age group. The oldest old are a smaller proportion of older women in developing countries (9 percent in 1997), but they are growing at a much faster pace, and will more than triple in number by 2025. Because of the gender differentials in life expectancy mentioned above, the oldest old account for a smaller proportion of older men in both the developed and developing world (12 and 7 percent, respectively, in 1997). The growth of the oldest old has many important implications for social planning, since these individuals are more likely to be in poorer health and require more services than the younger old. Given the preponderance of women among the oldest old (e.g., higher than 70 percent in Germany and Ukraine), many of the needs of the oldest old are actually the needs of women.

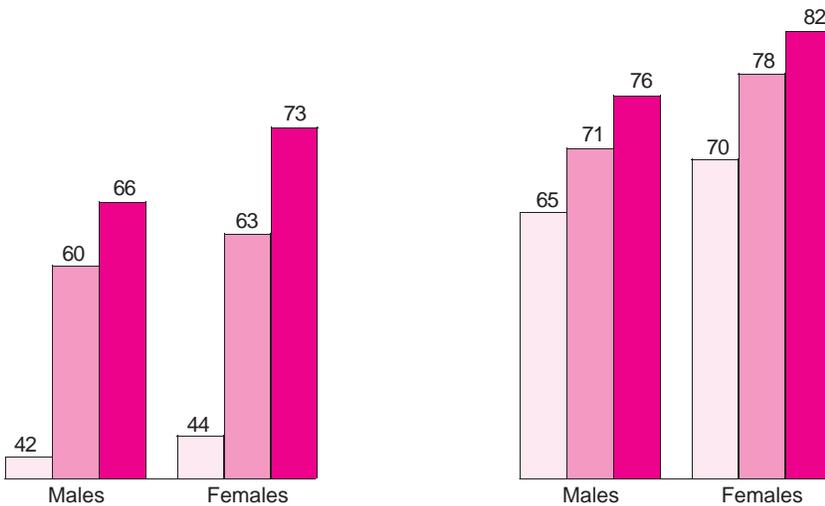
Figure 5.

Years of Life Expectancy at Birth: 1955, 1997, and 2025

1955
1997
2025

Developing countries

Developed countries

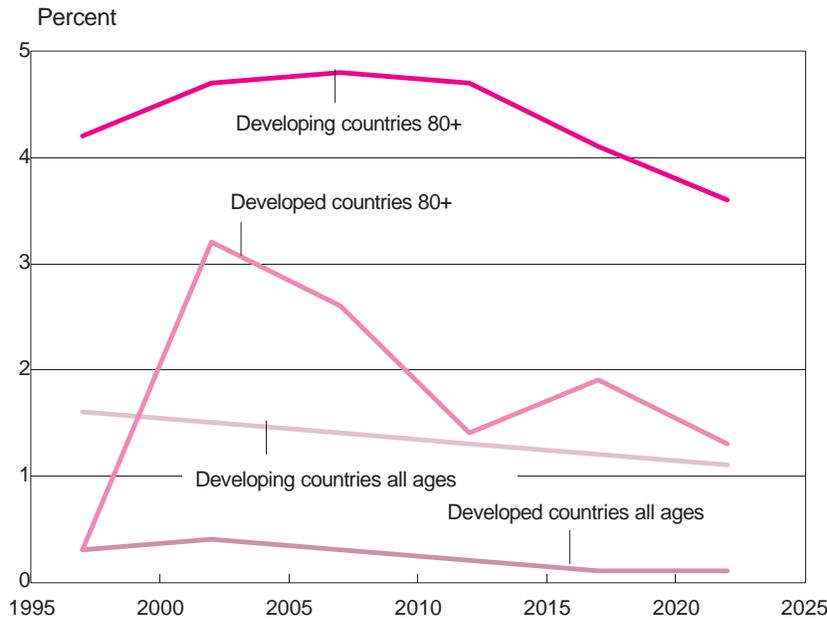


Source: United Nations, 1995 and U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

Older Women More Likely Than Men to Live in Urban Areas

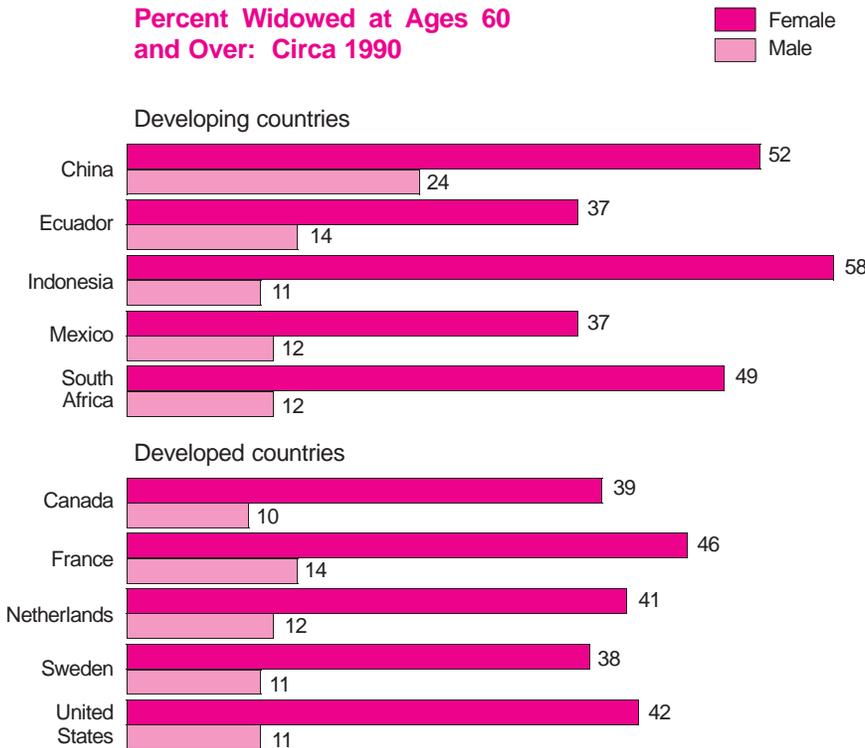
In keeping with the worldwide trend toward increased urbanization, the older populations of both developed and developing regions have become more concentrated in cities during the last two decades. At the same time, however, many rural areas have become disproportionately "old". This is a result of the outflow of young adults from rural areas to urban centers in search of work, and in some cases, the return migration of older adults from cities back to their childhood homes. Rural-to-urban population shifts can have repercussions for older persons in rural areas, who may find themselves without direct familial

Figure 6.
Average Annual Growth Rate for the Female Population: 1995 to 2025



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

Figure 7.
Percent Widowed at Ages 60 and Over: Circa 1990



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center.

support and, in some cases, with the added responsibility of raising grandchildren in the absence of migrating children.

In many countries, older women are more likely to live in urban areas than are older men. This gender difference in residential concentration appears to be related partly to stages in the life cycle. Older women are more likely to be disabled and to be widowed than are older men. Urban living may provide older women, especially widows, the support benefits of living near their children and the proximity to specialized health and social services (Kinsella and Taeuber, 1993).

Older Women Much More Likely to be Widowed Than Older Men

The circumstances of older women’s lives depend in large part on their marital status. Married older women have a lower probability of living in poverty than do their unmarried counterparts. Marital status also strongly influences an older woman’s living arrangements. Throughout much of the world, women tend to marry men older than themselves. This, combined with higher female life expectancy, increases the chances that a woman will outlive her spouse and spend a portion of her older years living on her own or with adult children. In most countries, older women are much more likely to be widowed than are older men (Figure 7).

Women are having fewer children in both the developing and developed world. In just the last 17 years (1980-1997), the world’s total fertility rate has declined from 4.1 children to 2.9 children per woman. Many developing countries now have total fertility rates near or below the population replacement level of 2.1. Declining fertility eventually means fewer children to care for aging

parents. At the same time, increased longevity has enhanced the joint survival of different generations. Family structures are changing so that there is an increase in the number of generations alive at one time and a decline in the number of family members within each generation (Blieszner and Bedford, 1995). As a result, the duration of the relationships between an older woman and her children and grandchildren has lengthened (Marshall and McPherson, 1994).

As fertility rates fall and social norms change vis-a-vis divorce and marital separation, an area of increasing concern is the status of unmarried or childless older women. There are relatively high rates of non-marriage among older women in Scandinavia and parts of the Caribbean (e.g., 12 percent of older women in Finland and 18 percent of older women in Trinidad and Tobago have never married). In the United States, one-sixth or more of women in some Baby

Boom cohorts are childless. Involuntary infertility is a problem in many African countries, even though rates of infertility have been declining. In several countries in Central Africa in the 1980s, more than 20 percent of women aged 45 years and over were childless (Evina, 1994). Many of these women are likely to find themselves without family support in older age, and this issue may become particularly critical in countries where government and community support for older individuals is lacking.

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This profile, the first in a series, was written by Yvonne J. Gist and Victoria A. Velkoff and produced with the support of the Office of the Demography of Aging, Behavioral and Social Research Program, U.S. National Institute on Aging. Future Gender and Aging profiles will examine issues of health, economic security, and care-giving, and how the world's societies have different responses to the lives and needs of older persons.

Table 1.
Population Indicators by Age and Sex

Country	Population aged 60 and over (in 000's)				Years of life expectancy at birth 1997		Percent widowed aged 60 and over		Percent literate aged 60 and over	
	1997		2025		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Afghanistan	558	501	1434	1344	47	46	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Algeria	808	910	2316	2500	68	70	7	55	19 ³	4 ³
Argentina	2118	2811	3591	4698	71	78	12	45	93	91
Australia	1339	1641	2719	3194	77	83	11	40	(4)	(4)
Bangladesh	3469	2962	8551	8657	56	56	7	68	30	5
Brazil	5061	6958	13197	17535	57	66	13	47	59	54
Canada	2112	2724	4515	5506	76	83	10	39	(4)	(4)
China	56993	61303	137234	153406	69	72	24	52	50	11
Colombia	1172	1434	3801	4747	70	76	15	46	73	64
Egypt	1736	2056	4319	5447	60	64	12	60	31	7
Ethiopia	1223	1366	2108	2746	45	48	N/A	N/A	12 ²	3 ²
France	5037	6925	8136	10175	75	83	14	46	(4)	(4)
Germany	7138	10636	12811	14868	73	79	17	50	(4)	(4)
India	31662	32242	80620	84476	60	61	20	51	15 ¹	7 ¹
Indonesia	6112	7440	17189	20648	60	64	11	58	68 ²	38 ²
Italy	5515	7496	8020	9969	75	82	12	43	95 ³	92 ³
Japan	11738	15280	17606	22020	77	83	10	44	(4)	(4)
Kenya	536	642	996	1381	54	55	N/A	N/A	11	25
Malaysia	568	692	1756	2265	67	73	14	54	43	9
Mexico	2972	3473	7915	10579	70	78	12	37	71	59
Morocco	927	1054	2546	3041	68	72	7	62	15	1
Nepal	557	546	1291	1393	54	55	18	48	24	3
Pakistan	4065	4052	8289	9412	58	60	12	47	18	5
Peru	809	922	2293	2587	67	72	17	43	76 ³	49 ³
Philippines	1901	2271	5099	6541	63	69	15	41	78 ³	72 ³
Poland	2486	3730	4115	5740	68	77	14	50	(4)	(4)
Romania	1720	2281	1890	2733	66	74	14	47	95 ³	82 ³
Russia	8402	16676	13219	21011	57	71	12	55	97 ³	84 ³
South Africa	1205	1659	1905	2977	54	58	11	49	59 ³	55 ³
South Korea	1833	2645	5770	6950	70	78	12	64	N/A	N/A
Spain	3639	4777	5257	6516	75	82	11	39	94 ³	85 ³
Sri Lanka	822	863	1936	2471	70	75	13	50	83	56
Sudan	677	549	1623	1975	55	57	7	56	26	4
Taiwan	1311	1157	2947	3321	74	79	14	42	78	37
Tanzania	624	726	687	1163	40	43	8	45	27 ³	5 ³
Thailand	2424	2920	6100	8060	65	73	17	53	82	62
Turkey	2510	2818	6558	7331	70	75	11	45	75	41
Ukraine	3478	6389	4556	7027	62	72	13	55	(4)	(4)
United Kingdom	5117	6871	7720	9303	74	79	14	43	(4)	(4)
United States	18723	25436	37977	44524	73	79	13	47	91	93
Uzbekistan	675	954	1584	2094	61	69	15	59	(4)	(4)
Venezuela	682	775	2094	2512	69	76	10	35	75 ²	66 ²

Notes:

N/A Data not available.

¹ Data refer to ages 50 and over.

² Data refer to ages 55 and over.

³ Data refer to ages 65 and over.

⁴ When literacy among adult cohorts becomes pervasive, many industrialized nations no longer collect and/or tabulate statistics on literacy. Such countries may report to international organizations that overall adult literacy is essentially universal (98 percent or more). The experience of some industrialized countries that do collect and tabulate literacy data suggests that, at least among older adult cohorts, the actual literacy rate is lower than commonly assumed.

The countries included in this table were chosen with consideration to population size and data availability.

Data for marital status and literacy represent the latest available data from the period 1980 to 1997.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center, International Data Base.

Table 2.

Total and Older Population by Region: 1997 and 2025

(Numbers in thousands)

1997										
Region	Total		Aged 60 and over		Percent aged 60 and over		Aged 80 and over		80 and over as a percent of 60 and over	
	male	female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
World	2,945,961	2,904,473	251,983	309,443	9	11	22,703	41,837	9	14
Asia	1,695,570	1,620,779	131,500	144,122	8	9	9,576	14,274	7	10
Near East	82,869	77,903	4,869	5,316	6	7	411	586	8	11
Baltics	3,509	4,010	502	911	14	23	49	139	10	15
Newly Independent States	134,914	150,588	15,388	28,610	11	19	1,133	4,182	7	15
Eastern Europe	58,484	61,559	8,745	12,369	15	20	806	1,678	9	14
Western Europe	190,196	198,161	34,146	47,086	18	24	4,527	10,073	13	21
Latin America/Caribbean	246,045	250,227	17,023	21,314	7	9	1,702	2,720	10	13
North America	145,361	151,776	20,837	28,162	14	19	3,092	6,288	15	22
Oceania	14,368	14,270	1,745	2,117	12	15	221	410	13	19
Sub-Saharan Africa	304,111	305,889	13,225	14,913	4	5	876	1,127	7	8
North Africa	70,534	69,311	4,004	4,523	6	7	309	360	8	8

2025										
Region	Total		Aged 60 and over		Percent aged 60 and over		Aged 80 and over		80 and over as a percent of the elderly	
	male	female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
World	3,975,344	3,960,741	545,726	645,037	14	16	61,690	100,478	11	16
Asia	2,211,498	2,162,264	314,728	354,542	14	16	31,386	47,608	10	13
Near East	153,599	148,097	14,979	14,798	10	10	1,624	2,197	11	15
Baltics	3,412	3,778	661	1,040	19	28	91	217	14	21
Newly Independent States	151,101	164,628	24,017	37,237	16	23	2,302	5,990	10	16
Eastern Europe	58,981	62,685	12,413	17,272	21	28	1,565	3,376	13	20
Western Europe	194,960	199,972	54,671	66,062	28	33	9,882	16,883	18	26
Latin America/Caribbean	330,974	340,479	42,806	54,787	13	16	4,969	8,565	12	16
North America	181,955	189,119	42,501	50,039	23	26	6,373	9,986	15	20
Oceania	18,768	18,829	3,594	4,207	19	22	587	897	16	21
Sub-Saharan Africa	559,255	561,216	24,993	32,735	4	6	2,074	3,365	8	10
North Africa	110,842	109,674	10,362	12,319	9	11	839	1,393	8	11

Note: For a list of the countries in each region, see McDevitt, 1996.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Programs Center, International Data Base.